

Christ, from his first obedience in childhood right through to the final obedience of Gethsemane and Calvary.

Be Still and Know / Michael Ramsey 1904–88

Related topics

For further study:

Transfiguration; Transformation; Conversion; Prophets; Faith

Closing Prayer

You show us yourself, O God,
unveiled in the face of Jesus Christ.

Let the Holy Spirit free our minds and hearts
to grasp the sense of the Law and the prophets
so that as we contemplate Jesus in his passion
we may be able to proclaim him
as the crucified and living One,
whose glory is with you and the Holy Spirit,
for ever and ever.

Collect for the Sunday next before Lent, Year C²

The Sunday next before Lent

Principal Service readings

Exodus 34.29-35

Moses' face shone

Psalm 99

God, the upright and holy king

2 Corinthians 3.12 – 4.2

We are being transformed from one degree of glory to another

Luke 9.28-36[37-43a]

The transfiguration of Christ

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The transfiguration

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' – not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Luke 9.28-36 NRSV¹

² *Celebrating the Christian Year : Prayers and Resources for Sundays, Holy Days and Festivals, Years A, B and C* / compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. Norwich : Canterbury Press, 2004-2005.

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Comments and Questions

In Luke's account the reason given for Jesus going up the mountain is to pray; Mark does not give a reason. He takes Peter, James and John with him (just as he will do before his betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane).

From the beginning of Jesus public ministry (Luke 4) up to this point Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and healing in towns and villages in the Galilee area. In Luke 9.22 he has given the first prophecy about his Passion. After the transfiguration there will be another prophecy about his Passion (vv.44-45) and then he will set out towards Jerusalem (v.51).

In Luke's account the transfiguration is a personal experience for Jesus (v.29). Why would his clothes become 'dazzling white'? How do you think he felt about it?

While Jesus is undergoing this experience, two figures, Moses and Elijah, appear on the scene. Why these two? It could be: (a) because according to ancient tradition Moses and Elijah did not experience death naturally but were taken up into the next life, only to reappear as heralds of the messianic age; (b) Moses represented the law, and Elijah the prophets, both now handing over their roles to the messiah.

Luke is the only one among the gospel writers to tell us the details of the mountain-top conversation: 'They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure' (v.31). The word 'departure', in Greek 'exodus', is a powerfully symbolic term, as well as meaning 'death'.

The disciples Jesus had taken with him fell asleep (the event occurred at night, it seems), and they missed the conversation, but woke up in time to see the three glorified figures. Why does Peter suggest making three shelters or booths (v.33)?

Peter's words are interrupted by the coming of a cloud (v.34), which frightens them. This is because the cloud on the mountain alerts them to the awesomeness of God's presence, as recorded in Exodus 24.15-16 (see also Acts 1.9). They would not be surprised, then, to hear the voice coming from the cloud to declare the divine sonship of Jesus (as at the baptism of Jesus, Luke 3.21-22).

The mountain-top experience confirms to Jesus that he is on the right path, and he will soon 'turn his face towards Jerusalem' (v.51). For the disciples there is confirmation of the status of Jesus declared by Peter, as 'the Christ of God' (v.20). It is clear that Jesus is not simply one in a line of prophets.

When they come down the mountain Peter, James and John are silent (v.36). Why do they not speak about the experience?

Quotations

1

When the soul is counted worthy to enjoy communion with the Spirit of the light of God, and when God shines upon her with the beauty of his ineffable glory, preparing her as a throne and dwelling for himself, she becomes all light, all face, all eye: and there is no part of her that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. There is no part of her that is in darkness, but she is made wholly and in every part light and spirit.

The Homilies of St Macarius. Collection H, 1.2

2

The Son is the Image of the invisible God. All things that belong to the Father he expresses as the Image; all things that are the Father's he illumines as the splendour of his glory and manifests to us.

St Ambrose 339-97

3

In St Luke's account of the transfiguration of our Lord, we see his characteristic relating of a scene to prayer and to the mission of Jesus as he moves towards death and glory, Jesus is praying, and the light shines on his face. We do not know that it is a prayer of agony and conflict like the prayer in Gethsemane, but we know that it is a prayer near to the radiance of God and the prayer of one who has chosen the way of death. Luke tells us that the two witnesses Moses and Elijah were conversing about the exodus which Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem: not death alone, but the passing through death to glory, the whole going forth of Jesus as well as the leading forth of the new people of God in the freedom of the new covenant. Luke tells us that after the resurrection Jesus spoke of the witness of Moses and of all the prophets to his suffering and glory.

It was not a glory which the disciples at the time could fathom. No doubt they would have welcomed a glory on the mountain far away from the conflicts which had happened and the conflicts which were going to happen as Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem. Yet when Jesus went up the mountain to be transfigured he did not leave these conflicts behind, but rather carried them up the mountain so that they were transfigured with him. It was the transfiguration of the whole